

Season 2, Episode 2

Stephanie Myers

Bentley Ponder

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we look at comprehensive early care and education statewide systems and the work being done in two very different states with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative. Host Missy Coffey sits down with California's Stephanie Myers and Georgia's Bentley Ponder. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Missy Coffey:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Missy Coffey, senior principal, education researcher, and the director of PDG B-5 technical assistant center with SRI Education. Today, I'm happy to be joined by two incredible state leaders to discuss how the PDG B-5 grant has supported their systems building initiatives. First, we're joined by Stephanie Myers, Director of the California Head Start State Collaboration Office with the Childcare and Development Division at the California Department of Social Services. Thanks so much for joining us today, Stephanie.

Stephanie Myers:

Thank you for having me today.

Missy Coffey:

And we also have Bentley Ponder, the Deputy Commissioner of Quality Innovations and Partnerships with the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. It's great to have you join us today, Bentley.

Bentley Ponder:

Oh, thank you, Missy. Always happy to be here.

Missy Coffey:

We'll get started with you, Bentley. In your experience, why do states need a comprehensive early care and education system?

Bentley Ponder:

Well, I think to begin the question, I think we know what it's like when we don't have states with a comprehensive system. I think just simply looking in many ways that what it is demonstrates why we need that. For me, if I think about it in terms of just the different populations that are part of the system. For families, I think many families experience a system in a very fragmented way.

Bentley Ponder:

I can think of examples in Georgia where we have families call our referral system for childcare, but what they really need are services on affording childcare. While they may appreciate the referral, it doesn't help if we're not offering them services on how to afford what we're referring them to. I think

it's just the fragmented way that many of the systems have emerged. We all know it looks different from state to state and some of that's probably is by design and some of that probably is a good thing.

Bentley Ponder:

But we also know that how people experience the system really depends on where they live and what sort of access they have. I think just the fragmentation of it shows how we need a comprehensive system. I think a comprehensive system is needed so we can have that better alignment, and we're simply where we would have the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. And then the other two things I would say, Missy, is, one, just the sheer cost of services that families and children and our workforce needs.

Bentley Ponder:

By not having a comprehensive system, I think it makes those cost greater and then it actually leaves many people out. I think just to find a way to be more efficient and aligned would help. And then I think the bottom line with all this is we know what high quality is and high quality is not just what goes in the classroom. It's not just one part. It's all those other services that work with ECE.

Bentley Ponder:

And I'm going to always kind of gravitate towards the ECE part, because that's where I'm from, but I think we need a comprehensive system so we can best meet quality.

Missy Coffey:

Stephanie, I'll ask the same of you. Why do you think states need a comprehensive early care and education system?

Stephanie Myers:

Such an important question. It's so important states. Comprehensive, family centered early care and education systems are needed to ensure that all young children and families are provided access to a great start in life that prepares them for success in school and, of course, in life. In California, leadership for the California Department of Social Services is creating an avenue for our state to work towards a system that uses the following principles for engagement and systems building.

Stephanie Myers:

It focuses on equity. Puts the person back in person centered. Engages communities. Uses data to drive action. Focuses on whole child, whole family. Creating and adopting a culture of innovation and delivers outcomes that are important for families. Under the Newsom administration, they're laying the foundation for a comprehensive family centered early childhood system by proposing a set of early child investments that support family's economic, health, and wellness needs as a means of supporting the best outcomes for young children.

Stephanie Myers:

This includes efforts to expand access to quality childcare and early learning, efforts to combat child poverty and support families financial stability, and investments to support family health and wellness. The master plans recommendations create a roadmap to detailing how California can build upon its

present early learning and care mixed delivery system to create a family center driven by inclusion and governed with equity.

Stephanie Myers:

Currently there is momentum in California around early childhood behavior health and an understanding that tackling this critical issue must be transdisciplinary, cross agency endeavor, and utilize multiple strategies. The Newsom administration has invested \$1.4 billion, yes, billion, in the Child and Youth Behavior Health Initiative to advance progress toward a family centered comprehensive early childhood system.

Stephanie Myers:

And since we can't overlook what has happened with the pandemic, we would be remiss in not saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the importance of addressing whole child and family needs through equitable access to comprehensive services that support young children's early learning, family's health and mental health needs, and services to support family's economic stability.

Missy Coffey:

Very well said. Bentley, if in an ideal world Georgia had a fully comprehensive early care and education system, what would it look like and what would be different in your state?

Bentley Ponder:

First of all, I think we would have a much clearer understanding of what exactly is the system. I think you've probably heard me talk, Missy, but it wasn't until for me... I guess, I'd been at Decal about six or seven years then, and it wasn't until we actually had to write for the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant that I think I understood what a system approach is. I think by having a comprehensive system, we would all have a better understanding of what exactly that means.

Bentley Ponder:

I think a comprehensive system would lead to a, and I'm going to be careful here, a stronger workforce. And I don't say that meaning that our workforce itself isn't strong or that the people in the workforce aren't strong and aren't doing everything they can each and every day to support children, families, their colleagues, and themselves. But I think with a comprehensive system, the workforce would be better able to see what their role is in the system and the services they provide and what that means in contributing to the greater good.

Bentley Ponder:

And I would say that kind of leads me to my last point with the comprehensive system. You're always able to question. We don't just assume that programs are working or having the desired impact, but we're able to question those program. And by questioning, you look at those unintended consequences.

Bentley Ponder:

And also I just would be remiss if I didn't say we would have coordinated data and research systems too, but you knew I was going to say that.

Missy Coffey:

I knew you would. Stephanie, how has your PDG B-5 grant initiative promoted the comprehensive systems building work in California?

Stephanie Myers:

California's PDGR strategic plan, which we refer to as the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, was released in December of 2020. And it really serves as our 10 year roadmap that guides the design and implementation of a comprehensive early childhood system. The master plan that was promoted with the PPG Birth through Five identifies key policy goals and actions to ensure all children can thrive physically, emotionally, and educationally in their early years.

Stephanie Myers:

This often means that we are thinking beyond early learning and care programs and we identify, coordinate, and deliver the services and resources families need to thrive. For example, economic supports, TANF, SNAP, housing supports, nutrition services, and just so much more.

Stephanie Myers:

The PDGR has catalyzed progress toward the master plan's goals through essential investments and workforce development systems, integrated data systems and comprehensive family supports in alignment with other statewide initiatives to ensure that success is garnered through the PDGR are carried forth through sustainable system improvements and service of the state's long-term goals.

Stephanie Myers:

In fact, the PDGR has also enhanced California's ability to work collaboratively with early childhood state leadership. Funded exclusively through the PDGR, the state stewardship team, or the SST, brings together leadership from 18 different state offices and departments to support cross agency collaboration and strengthen the impact of the PDGR investments. During year two of the PDGR, the SST conversations focused on opportunities to collaborate and better coordinate services that support the whole child, whole family.

Missy Coffey:

Bentley, could you share a little bit about PDG B-5 has helped to promote comprehensive systems building work in Georgia?

Bentley Ponder:

I like the way that the PD grants outline the I think initially five activities and then a sixth activity when we did the renewal grants. I like those buckets. I like thinking of things in terms of buckets. And I think that those buckets gave us some ways to frame the work, gave us some good ways to look at where projects would fit, but also to really look comprehensively. I think we've gained from that by having the activity three, focused on families, activity four, workforce, activity five, quality activity six, data and research.

Bentley Ponder:

I think that was a nice way to frame the work, and it made sure that our work aligned, but it also gave us some scope and some flexibility to do some innovative things. I think that's been great. I think our needs assessment and strategic plan have been helpful. I don't know that we've reached the full potential of

what we could use those documents for. I think to have had a little bit more guidance on what those should have looked like from the beginning would have helped us with that.

Bentley Ponder:

I felt like we were kind of just out there trying to figure this out. For us, PDG was one piece of what we were doing. It became a little bit of a challenge, but I have to say I've been really pleasantly surprised at the number of times we've gone back to the needs assessment and the way we have used that to support other projects. But being able to use that needs assessment and then those findings and create community transformation grants that align to nine focal areas that we found in our needs assessment I think has been great and has been a great opportunity.

Bentley Ponder:

And that's just one of the projects that we're really excited about. I think we're still figuring out how to use that strategic plan with individual agency strategic plan, with our children's cabinet strategic plan, but I do think it's given us a good way to frame things. It's helped us move those things forward.

Missy Coffey:

I wonder, Bentley, because you brought up the needs assessment and strategic plans, if you could describe maybe how the PDG B-5 grants for the development of these planning documents, but more importantly, how are they being used to inform the comprehensive systems initiatives across the state?

Bentley Ponder:

You know, I don't know what it would have looked like had COVID not happened. I think COVID just threw I don't want to say a monkey wrench into those, but all of a sudden, a lot of our planning and things had to shift. Now, what PDG did give us, we were able to take that infrastructure that we did have with the needs assessment and those things that we had put in place and turn it into actually doing research related to COVID and COVID response.

Bentley Ponder:

That has been a tremendous help. We've done surveys with providers related to that. I think having that PDG infrastructure gave us that. I'm actually really grateful to the Feds too, our federal officers, for allowing us to pivot a little bit on some of this stuff. Because all of a sudden, new research needs merged and having the PDG bucket as a place to put that was really helpful.

Missy Coffey:

And that's a nice lead into the next piece of the conversation. What work were you able to do now that you couldn't have been able to do without PDG B-5?

Bentley Ponder:

Something that's near and dear to our heart is our ECIDS, which we refer to as Cactus in Georgia, had been floundering a bit. I think that is a really hard. The data system across agencies is really hard to do, because unless you have dedicated people that that is their job to manage this data system, it is just hard to keep that going. PDG allowed us to do a strategic plan and basically we're in the process of implementing Cactus 2.0. I don't think we would've been able to do that without PDG.

Bentley Ponder:

Having those funds to bring in external contractors and everything, that was great. We had been doing some community grants beforehand, but the PDG really gave us some space to design those a little bit differently. I mentioned those a few minutes ago, but to be able to do eight community level grants where community organizations get together. They pick a focal point from the needs assessment and tell us how they're going to address it and fund them to create a new project around that, and then have an evaluation to see how all this is working.

Bentley Ponder:

I think PDG was a great way to take those activity, buckets, those six buckets and think of different things you can do that can be innovative. You can do some small projects. You can do some bigger projects. I think that just gave us a lot of leeway to do some of those things.

Missy Coffey:

Stephanie, what are you most proud of in terms of your state's systems building work with your communities, regions, or counties in California?

Stephanie Myers:

As part of the Early Childhood Policy Council, I believe one of the successes has been the completion and the shared work of our master plan. The master plan, as I talked about earlier, reflects to decades of community, local, and state level recommendations that are organized into a framework that enables the state to design a family centered early childhood system. Without the clear path that the master plan provides, it would be difficult to ensure ongoing investments are truly supporting the best outcomes for our young children.

Stephanie Myers:

The implementation examples include investments to enhance workforce development systems, integrated data systems, and comprehensive family supports. Specific to my work as a collaboration office director, I'm particularly proud of my input and participation on numerous California work groups and state planning activities that share the voice and vision of Head Start.

Stephanie Myers:

My role in ongoing systems change work alongside the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education on transition planning from Head Start and/or state preschool programs to transitional kindergarten and the engagement with the California Department of Education to emphasize the importance of parent choice and the connection between school districts and universal transitional kindergarten and Head Start.

Stephanie Myers:

Building on local partnerships, planning efforts are underway to look at the opportunities and options for universal transitional kindergarten and Head Start to create a collaborative model and ultimately providing parents with the resources and supports they feel are beneficial to their family. Another piece of my work that I'm very proud of is through the Build Initiative and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Stephanie Myers:

I am part of the leadership team for Project HOPE, which stands for Harnessing Opportunities for Positive Early Childhood. We specifically are working to build trust and partnership to expand the access and quality of early learning and care for Native American children and their families, supporting local level system building for tribal childcare, and bringing the voices of tribal communities to the state.

Stephanie Myers:

And in turn, we are increasing the access to culturally appropriate materials and traditions for Native American children. We have successfully implemented as a team with the Tribal Child Care Association of California and the Department of Education and the memorandum of understanding, and we have recognized the Tribal Quality Improvement System, or the Tribal QIS, as a part of the California's Quality Counts California improvement and rating system. The state funds are provided and engages tribal programs with and from tribal leadership.

Missy Coffey:

I think it's wonderful. All the work you're doing with Project Hope and how it relates to your systems building work is fantastic. Bentley, I'll ask you the same question. What kinds of work are you most proud of in Georgia?

Bentley Ponder:

I think our systems work has allowed us to move beyond just pre-K, and I don't mean that disparagingly about. Georgia's pre-K is a wonderful program. It's where I started. I wouldn't be where I am today without Georgia's pre-K, but I think we were able to start thinking beyond that and still keep the strong part of Georgia Pre-K. I think when people think of early education in Georgia, we do think not just Georgia's pre-K anymore. Not everybody. But to me, that is a result of some of the system stuff we've done.

Bentley Ponder:

Of course, this may sound a little self-serving, I'm really proud of the research agenda we've done and some of the different research projects that we've been able to do, our pre-K longitudinal study, our economic impact study. But even more than that, just the way that we are able to use data on a day to day basis. Our quality rated team just a couple weeks ago, we were looking at having to make some decisions for next year related to the pandemic.

Bentley Ponder:

And because we have this in-house research team, they were able to go to them. We were able to put together a survey really quickly. Got the survey out. Started seeing the results. I'm like, "Wow! This is so useful for us." Quickly then went back to the research team and said, "Hey, can you help us present this in a way? Can you help us write this up?" Being able to have those things to help move the system forward, I'm really proud of.

Bentley Ponder:

I'm just proud that I do feel like in Georgia, we're able to question things, and we're able to ask the hard questions. I think that's helped us move the system forward.

Missy Coffey:

I think it's, as you mentioned earlier in the conversation, right, it's an ongoing process. PDG B-5 was just one of many sources that has helped build the systems conversation. I think that it goes to show how the investment that Georgia specifically has made in the research in data work that you all have been doing for the last decade and how you connect that to the types to program policy decisions that you all have been making.

Missy Coffey:

You have that intersection that I think a lot of states are really looking to as leaders and saying, "We wish we had more capacity as Georgia does in-house to do the kind of work that you all are doing." That's awesome. So Stephanie, what advice do you have for other professionals hoping to incorporate more communities into their own system building efforts?

Stephanie Myers:

Well, as you know, California is a large and diverse state, and it is so extremely important to authentically engage and put from the field representing diverse backgrounds and continuously throughout the systems development process. This includes families, childcare providers, trainers, service provider, state agencies and policy makers.

Stephanie Myers:

And alongside being authentic, it's important to be intentional about engaging populations who are traditionally underserved, underrepresented, and are disconnected from existing systems. Those examples include tribal, rural, families with young children with disabilities, and those racial and ethnic minorities.

Missy Coffey:

For my last question, from your perspective, how does having a comprehensive state system support parent choice?

Stephanie Myers:

Such an important question to ask, because parent choice should be front and center. Parent choice allows families to identify childcare and other families support services that address family's unique needs. It also allows for a greater shared understanding of the challenges families face and opportunities to collaborate at the state and local level to address those needs. Finally, it allows for stronger governance and administrative structures that reduce in efficiencies and maximize resources that go directly to families.

Missy Coffey:

This has been a really fantastic conversation and a wonderful look into the great work you're both doing in California and Georgia. Stephanie Myers and Bentley Ponder, thank you so much for joining us today.

Stephanie Myers:

Thank you so much.

Bentley Ponder:

Thank you, Missy.

Narrator:

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